Kerb deviations and missing kerbs – Evidence from Sheffield and elsewhere

Background

In a recent email conversation, you asked me to provide evidence to back up my statement that Sheffield City Council's attitude to straight kerb lines was "stricter than national guidelines, and stricter than most other Councils."

I'm happy to do this, and this document is that evidence.

National Guidelines

The separate Word document, with my responses to Phil Beacroft, deals with the national guidelines issue in more detail.

In summary though, terms of maintaining existing roads, there are no national guidelines, it is up to local authorities to maintain their roads in line with the duties set out in the Highways Act 1980, taking balanced risk assessments in the way they apply that duty.

Phil's document sets out Sheffield Council's own kerb specifications, which it included in the Streets Ahead PFI contract, which set out a specific specification, unlike any national guidelines for maintenance, which include no specific specifications at all.

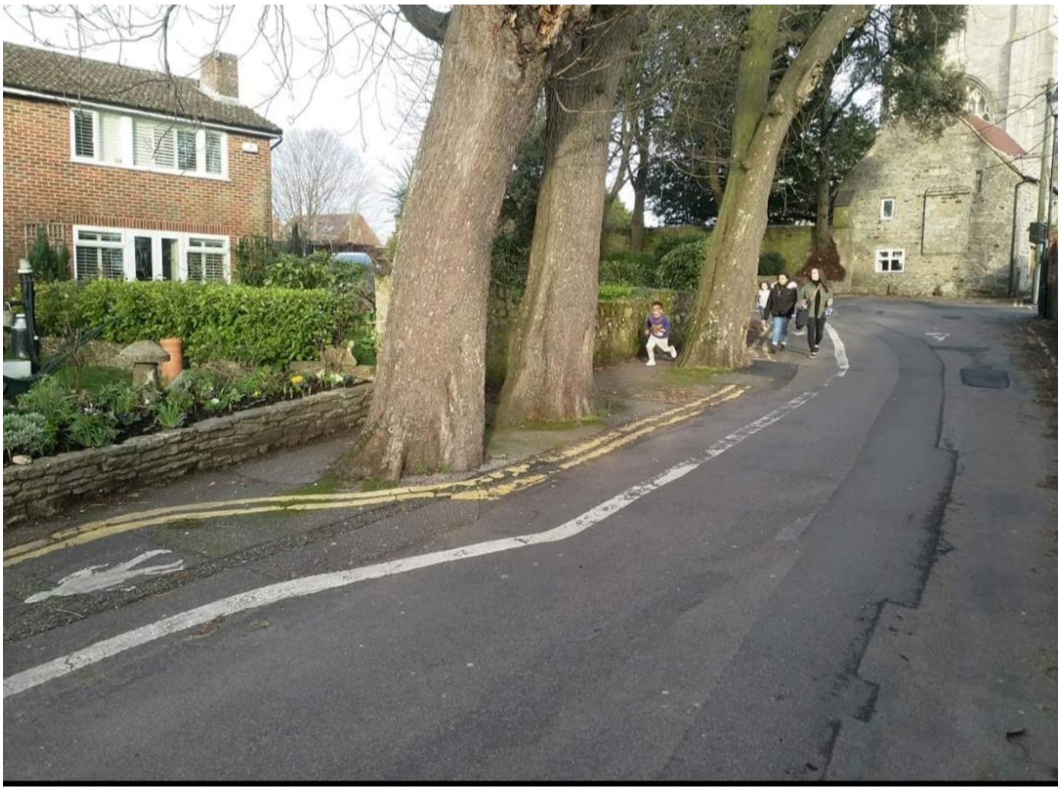
The approach of other local authorities

We have evidence from many many other UK local authorities, which do everything they can to retain trees, allowing deviations to kerb lines and leaving out kerb stones where necessary.

They do this because they value street trees, and in taking their balanced risk assessments on each tree, make decisions appropriate to the situation, retaining trees where the value is greater than the risk.

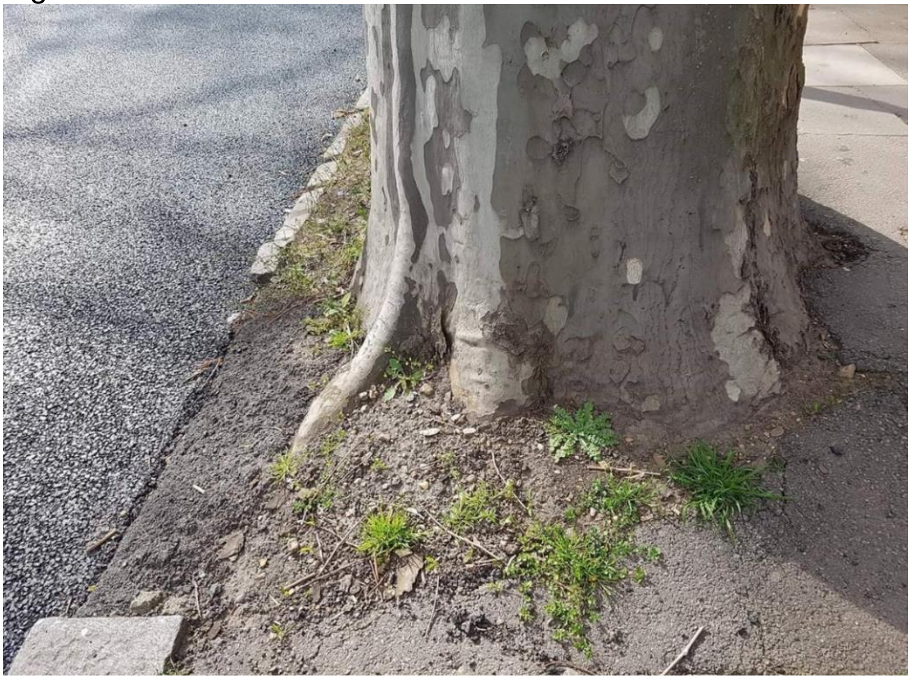
The first example I have, Figure 1, is from Christchurch on the south coast. Not only are there no kerbs at all, but the white painted lines and double yellow lines highlight any potential risk to road users. You can clearly see how pedestrians are directed to the road side of the tree, when walking down the road. It is obviously an extreme example of the lengths a local authority will go to, to retain trees, whilst carrying out its Highways Act duty. But it is doing so. It has placed a value on its street trees and carried out a balanced risk assessment, and decided to retain the trees with a relatively simple solution.

Figure 1: Kerb line deviations in Christchurch



The second example is from London. You can see the brand new road surface on the left hand side of the photo. Think kerb stones and a missing kerb stone have both been used to retain the tree. Again, the London local authority has placed a value on its street trees and carried out a balanced risk assessment, and decided to retain the trees with a relatively simple solution.

Figure 2: Kerb line deviations in London



I have written quotes from two people so far who either work for or with local authorities in relation to street trees and highways.

The first is from Caroline Hall, an arboriculture consultant who has worked with Cambridge City Council, Nottinghamshire County Council, Hertfordshire County

Council, Peterborough County Council and Highways England, all in relation to street trees and the highways issues they create. She says:

“They [the other local authorities] all have street trees with similar problems!

A risk management strategy would be where I might look in the case of the street trees. As this should incorporate risks from trees, and a statistical approach may offer a balance between the risks posed and the investment required to mitigate them. For example, a tree on a minor road with a low traffic count as opposed to a dual carriageway that is a bus route should not attract the same investment. And a prominent mature tree will require different consideration than a young tree on a stake.

Of course, the risks I always consider are the risks of not having trees at all! We are at risk of leaving a legacy on our streets of low canopy cover, young and short lived trees that don’t shade us from the effects of climate change, lots of things to consider.”

Ian Dalton, who works as a Tree Officer for the London Borough of Bromley says similar:

“I did ask one of the highways inspectors about kerb specifications and he basically said that there's no official guidance that they follow, and that decisions about root damaged footways and kerbs are made entirely at the discretion of the inspecting highways officer. In short, if they see a potential trip hazard they repair the kerb or pavement, if they don't they just leave it.”

Ged Collins, a retired Tree Officer from Salford worked for 27 years with highways engineers in the Council with the default approach of doing everything possible to retain street trees, even going to the point of retaining 4 metre high dead stumps for their habitat value. On the point about kerb lines, he was absolutely clear:

“Whilst working for Salford CC 1985 to 2012 I did not remove any trees because they were deviating the Kerb Line.”

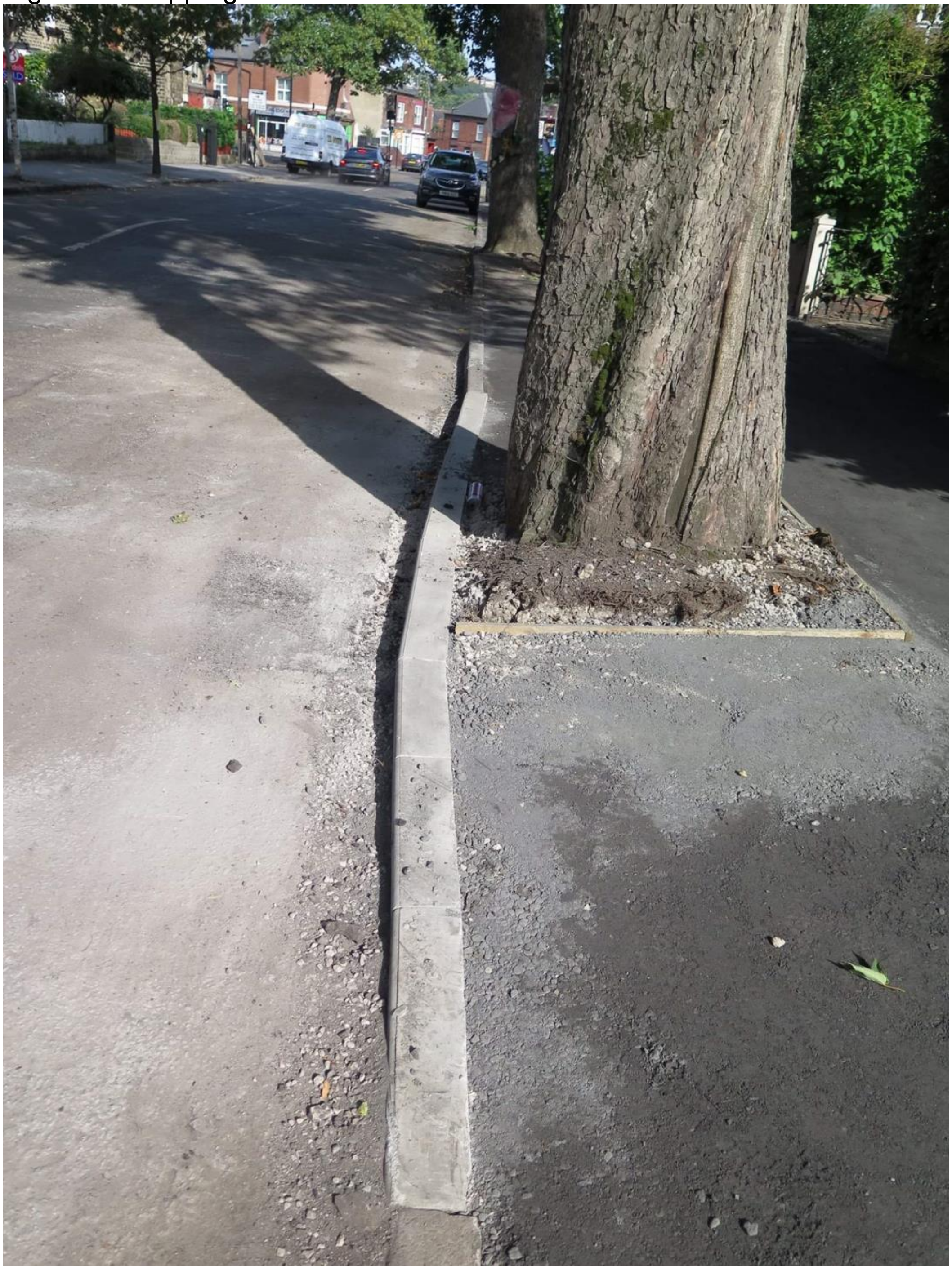
I have outstanding quotes expected from five other highways engineers or arborists who work for or with other local authorities across the country. They are all back at work this week, having been on leave since I sent my request for quotes from them, on 24th December. I expect all to say something similar.

Sheffield evidence

Interestingly, for all that Sheffield Council claims to believe in the specifications of the PFI contract, there are many examples where it doesn’t stick to them.

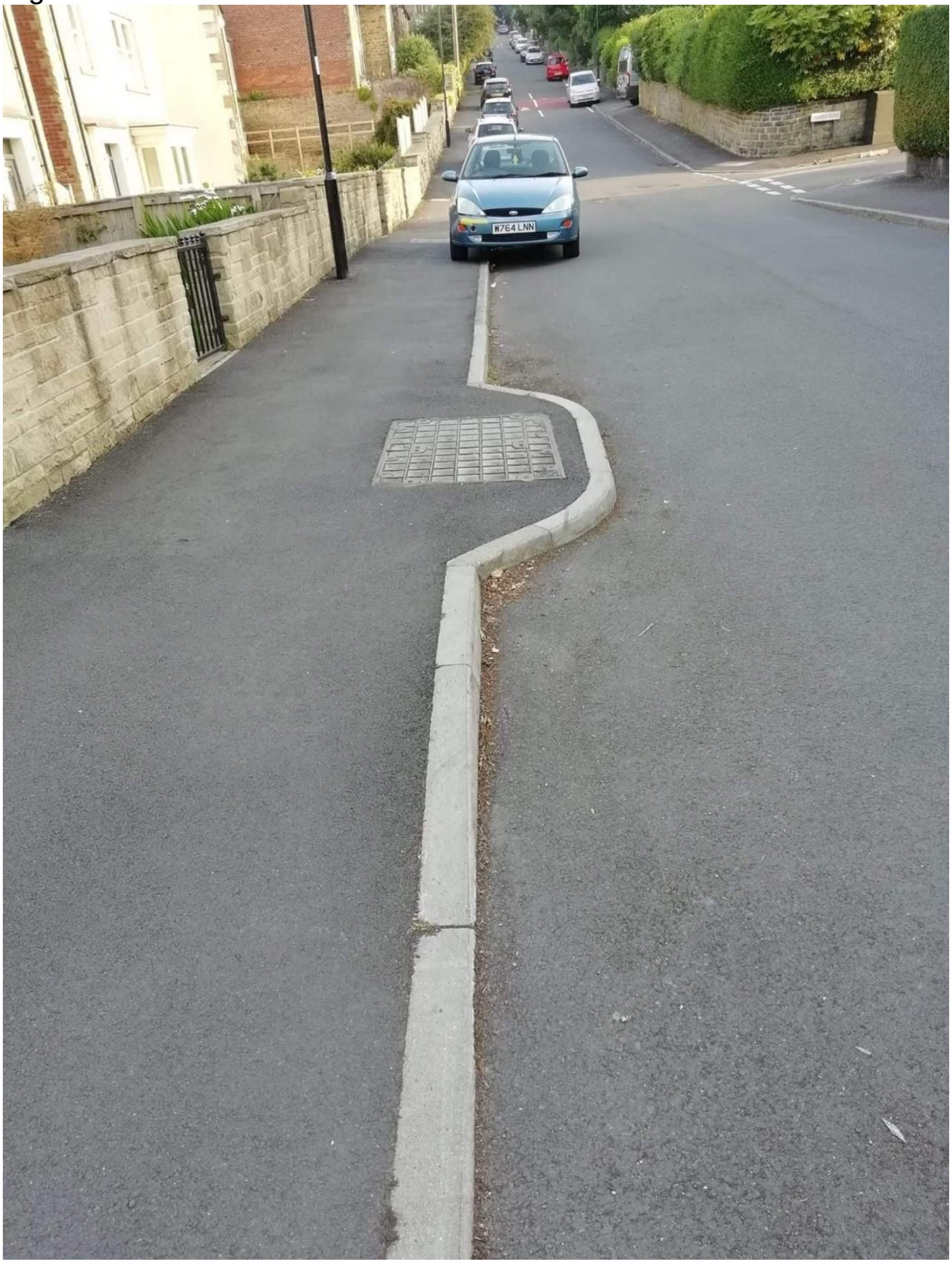
Figure 3 shows an example on Chippinghouse Road, where the kerb line deviates from being straight, in order to retain a tree. This is exactly the sort of solution campaigners have been asking for to retain many of the other street trees. We applaud this example.

Figure 3: Chippinghouse Road kerb line deviation to retain a street tree



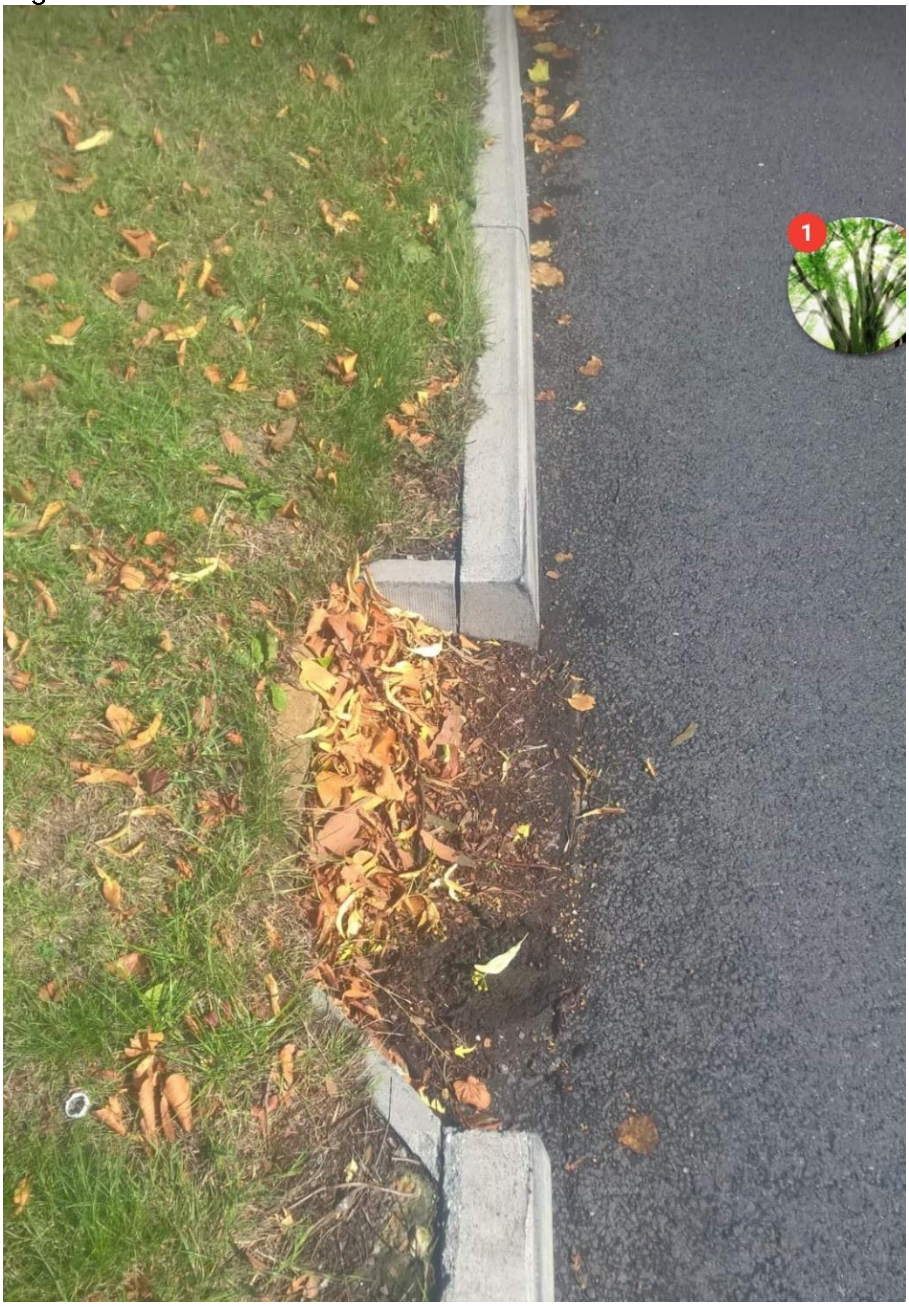
The next example is Figure 4, from Oakhill Road, and nothing to do with street trees. Basically the kerb line has an extreme build out/deviation in order to go round a drain. There are no white lines or road signs to warn drivers or cyclists of the hazard. I live just round the corner from this, and to my knowledge, in the nine years I've lived nearby, there has never been an accident. So again, the local authority, in this case Sheffield, has conducted a risk assessment, and decided such extreme kerb deviations are appropriately safe to allow, and still maintain its Highways Act duties. If this can be done for assets such as drains, why can't it be done for assets such as healthy mature street trees?

Figure 4: Kerb deviation on Oakhill Road



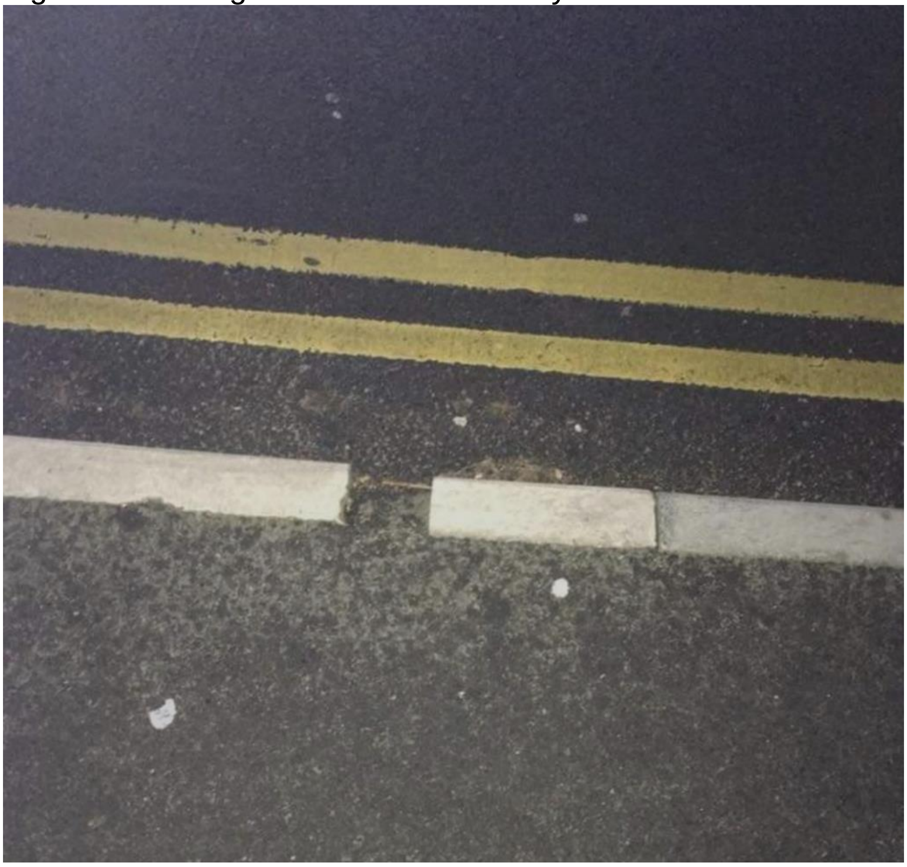
Another example in Sheffield is Figure 5, on Whirlowdale Road. This is another, less extreme example, of a kerb deviation for a drain. Note the sharp edges to the kerb stones that are exposed and the fact there are no painted warning line or signs. Again Sheffield Council has taken a risk assessment and decided that it is appropriate to deviate the kerb line, in relation to a street asset, in this case a drain. Perfectly appropriate and well within its Highways Act duties to do so.

Figure 5: Kerb deviations on Whirlowdale Road



Finally, Figure 6 shows an example in Sheffield of a missing kerb stone. This is on a newly resurfaced road with newly resurfaced pavement. There is a gap in the kerb stones. An odd one, but a gap all the same. Whilst I personally don't advocate for missing kerb stones, I would not rule using them out to retain healthy mature trees. If this is acceptable in some places in Sheffield, why can't it be acceptable in other places?

Figure 6: Missing kerb stone on a newly resurfaced road in Sheffield



Summary and Conclusion

- Sheffield Council already allows significant kerb deviations over and above what is allowed in the contract specification. This note shows evidence of this, not just for street trees, but also for drains.
- There are hundreds of similar examples across the UK, of other local authorities making the conscious decision to curve kerb lines and miss out kerb stones, in order to protect and retain large healthy street trees
- Written quotes from three people (with more to come) who work for, or with, local authorities in relation to street trees and highways, confirms they take balanced risk assessments to retain street trees where they can.